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ABSTRACT

Courses in communication theory in the 1990s may emphasize the social sciences, critical theory, or both, depending on the orientation of the professor. The modern field of communication in the United States arose after World War I in response to increasing technology and the progressive, pragmatic philosophy that has dominated American life. Rhetorical theory courses cover the history of rhetorical thinking and contemporary rhetorical thought. Despite their differences in content, the teaching and learning processes in both courses is similar. Approximately four types of theory courses can be found in college programs: basic rhetoric, introduction to communication, historical survey, and contemporary theories. Formats for the courses include: survey of theories, alternative perspectives, integrated concepts, inquiry and theory building, and application and analysis. The teaching of both rhetorical and communication theory involves curricular and content tensions. Curricular tensions relate to the proper place for theory in the curriculum and the proportion of theory and application. The issue of theory versus practice is part of the larger debate on the nature of communication competence. Tensions of a content sort include: the separation of rhetoric and communication into distinct areas; borrowing theories from other disciplines; and the Western male bias of most contemporary theories in communication. Chief among the issues awaiting investigation are: the multicultural agenda; student readiness; methods of teaching abstract concepts; teaching and learning in different campus environments; and integrating rhetorical and communication theory. (Thirty-seven notes are included.) (RS)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING RHETORICAL AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Introduction

The modern field of communication in the United States arose after World War I in response to increasing technology and the progressive, pragmatic philosophy that has dominated American life.[1] Since its beginnings, communication education in its various disciplinary forms in this country has included a theory component. The primary concern of theory in the early years was communication as influence, especially propaganda, public opinion, and advertising. The interest in theory was stimulated, too, by the increasing popularity of empirical research methods, which became especially pronounced with the rise of the social sciences after World War II. Although the social sciences exerted a strong influence on theory in the communication field, the humanities also has had a strong foothold.

Humanistic theory in the communication field has important links with the great rhetorical writers of the past.

[1] For a general history of the field, see Jesse G. Delia, "Communication Research: A History," Handbook of Communication Science, eds. C. R. Berger and S. H. Chaffee (Newbury Park, CA.: Sage, 1987) 20-98.

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This branch of theory makes use of the Sophists, Aristotle, and Plato as starting points and deals with a variety of writers throughout history whose theories contribute to an understanding of rhetoric.[2]

To this day there remains a rather strong separation between the scientific and rhetorical traditions in the field. Most college programs include separate courses in "rhetorical theory" and "communication theory."[3] Pearce explains this division as a tension between two early schools of thought--the Cornell school of rhetoric and the Midwestern school of speech.[4] The program at Cornell was based on classical texts, and its advocates considered the study of rhetoric to be an art not amenable to study by scientific

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[2] Michael C. Leff and Margaret Organ Procario, "Rhetorical Theory in Speech Communication," Speech Communication in the 20th Century, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985) 3-27; W. Barnett Pearce and Karen Foss, "The Historical Context of Communication as a Science," Human Communication: Theory and Research, eds. Gordon L. Dahnke and Glen W. Clatterbuck (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990) 1-20; Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present (Boston: Bedford, 1990); James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, and William E. Coleman, The Rhetoric of Western Thought, 4th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1989); Nancy L. Harper, Human Communication Theory: The History of a Paradigm (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1979).

[3] Arthur P. Bochner and Eric M. Eisenberg, "Legitimizing Speech Communication: An Examination of Coherence and Cohesion in the Development of the Discipline," Speech Communication in the 20th Century 299-321.

[4] W. Barnett Pearce, "Scientific Research Methods in Communication Studies and Their Implications for Theory and Research," Speech Communication in the 20th Century 255-81.

method. The Midwestern school, influenced by professors at Wisconsin and Illinois, took a wider view and looked at communication in its many forms, choosing to study it scientifically.

In Europe communication theory took a different direction. Influenced by Marxist thought, revolution, and the struggle against facism in the twentieth century, European interests centered on communication as a means of promoting interest and power, and a distinctly critical brand of scholarship arose.[5] American communication theory and European critical theory remained fairly separate until the 1970s when they began a dialogue and influence flowed both ways across the Atlantic. In the United States, rhetorical theorists were quick to assimilate European ideas, while most social scientists in this country have been slow to do so.[6] At the same time, a vocal group of American critical theorists came to have an influence on the field.[7]

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[5] See, for example, Ferment in the Field, a special edition of Journal of Communication 33 (1983).

[6] Everett M. Rogers, "The Empirical and the Critical Schools of Communication Research," Communication Yearbook 5, ed. Michael Burgoon (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction 1982) 125-44; James Lull, "The Audience as Nuisance," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 5 (1988): 239-43; Jay Blumler, "Communication and Democracy: The Crisis Beyond and the Ferment Within," Journal of Communication 33 (1983): 166-73; and Michael Real, "The Debate on Critical Theory and the Study of Communications," Journal of Communication 34 (Autumn 1984): 72-80.

[7] See, for example, Lawrence Grossberg, "Stretegies of Marxist Cultural Interpretation," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 1 (1984): 392-421; and Dennis K. Mumby,

Today in the United States, courses in communication theory may emphasize the social sciences, critical theory, or both, depending on the orientation of the professor. Rhetorical theory courses cover the history of rhetorical thinking and contemporary rhetorical thought. Both areas have been influenced other disciplines, including primarily philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and psychology. In addition, material on language, semiotics and meaning, interpretation of text and culture, and other such concerns may be found in either course. We are treating rhetorical and communication theory together in this essay because, despite their differences in content, the teaching and learning process in both courses is similar.

Key Terms

Three key terms are basic for making distinctions in the teaching of rhetorical and communication theory: rhetoric, communication, and theory. Definitions of rhetoric range from the narrow study of persuasive discourse to the broader humanistic study of communication in all its forms.[8] Communication has been defined in a number of ways, from the somewhat narrow idea of transmitting information to the very broad notion of using symbols and assigning mean-

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Communication and Power in Organizations: Discourse, Ideology, and Domination (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988).

[8] See, for example, Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss, and Robert Trapp, Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1991); and Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification," Communication Education 33 (1984): 97-107.

ing.[9] It is clear that the distinction between rhetoric and communication is fuzzy at best, and the use of the terms depend upon the background and training of the writer or teacher.

Theory, too, is an ambiguous concept. Some professors who teach communication theory, for example, prefer a very narrow, scientific definition.[10] Others define the term broadly to include any conceptual representation--scientific or humanistic, narrow or broad.[11] In practice, most communication and rhetorical theory courses cover a variety of generalized ideas about a number of aspects of rhetoric and communication. The specific material covered will vary depending upon the perspective of the professor.

Types of Courses

Approximately four types of theory courses can be found in college programs. The first is the introductory rhetoric course. Basic rhetoric courses usually provide instruction in speaking and/or writing and make use of classical foundations.[12] Second, the introductory communication-theory

[9] Frank E. X. Dance, "The 'Concept' of Communication," Journal of Communication 20 (1970): 201-10.

[10] See, for example, Myron W. Lustig, "Theorizing About Human Communication," Communication Quarterly 34 (1986): 451-59.

[11] See, for example, Stephen W. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992) 21.

[12] See, for example, Gerard A. Hauser, Introduction to Rhetorical Theory (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1986).

course, usually called Communication Process or Introduction to Communication is typically a non-skills course that provides an overview of basic communication concepts and typically relies on twentieth century social-science concepts.[13]

The third type of course, which is usually taught on the upper division, provides an historical survey, and such courses almost always have a rhetorical focus.[14] They may include a general historical sweep or, less common these days, focus on particular periods. The fourth type of course is the contemporary theories approach, which covers a variety of separate theories and may stress rhetorical theory, communication theory, or both.[15] Many programs have separate contemporary theories course in both rhetorical and communication theory. Because of the advanced nature of the material, most contemporary-theories courses are on the upper-division or graduate level.

Aside from these general types of courses, they can be taught in a variety of ways. Littlejohn discusses a number of formats for the communication theory course, which can be extrapolated easily to rhetorical theory as well:[16]

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[13] See, for example, Dahnke and Clatterbuck.

[14] See, for example, Harper.

[15] See, for example, Foss, Foss, and Trapp; Sarah Trenholm, Human Communication Theory (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

[16] Stephen W. Littlejohn, "Communication Theory," Communication Pedagogy: Theory and Practice, ed. Linda Lederman (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, forthcoming, 1992). See also Stephen W. Littlejohn, Richard Rogers, and Roberta Gray,

(1) Survey of theories--A theory-by-theory approach, in which students are led through the works of several theorists one at a time.[17]

(2) Alternative perspectives--Focusses on a number of ways of viewing and thinking about communication, classifying theories according to perspective.[18]

(3) Integrated concepts--Provides a general model or set of ideas by which students can connect and relate various theoretical concepts.[19]

(4) Inquiry and theory building--Emphasizes the process of discovery, research, and theory-creation by showing how theories are built and helping students to create their own theories.[20]

Theories of Human Communication: Faculty Desk Reference (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992).

[17] See, for example, Littlejohn, Theories; Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present (Boston: Bedford, 1990); and Foss, Foss, and Trapp.

[18] See, for example, B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication (New York: Macmillan, 1978); and Douglas Ehninger, Contemporary Rhetoric: A Reader's Coursebook (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972).

[19] See, for example, Beth Haslett, Communication: Strategic Action in Context (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1987); and Herbert W. Simons, The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[20] See, for example, Dominic A. Infante, Andrew S. Rancer, ans Deanna F. Womack, Building Communication Theory (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1990).

(5) Application and analysis--Relies heavily on case studies and examples to help students see the utility and relevance of theories.[21]

Issues and Tensions

A coherent body of research on the teaching of communication and rhetorical theory does not exist, but various opinions have arisen from the practice of teaching these courses. Insights from research in developmental and educational psychology could be useful in making pedagogical generalizations, but these would be very general, only vaguely related, and lie beyond the scope of this essay. Consequently, we can present no state-of-the-art review based on research on the teaching of communication and rhetorical theory. Instead, we summarize some of the issues about pedagogy based on practice as expressed in various papers and publications.

The teaching of both rhetorical and communication theory involves two general areas of tension--curricular and content. The curricular tension relates to the proper place for theory in the curriculum. Should it come early or later

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[21] See, for example, Stephen W. Littlejohn and Roberta Gray, Learning and Using Communication Theories (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992); Catherine Ann Collins and Jeanne E. Clark, "Teaching Burke by Means of Alternative Close Readings," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, San Francisco, 1989; and Charles U. Larson, "Teaching Burke Using Advertisements," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, San Francisco, 1989.

in the student's program? Should it be integrated throughout, and if so, how? At some institutions, theory courses are seen as foundational to students' understanding of performance in the various areas of the field.[22] Here theory courses come early in the major--at the freshman or sophomore level, or perhaps even in high school.[23] This approach also enables students to "get the big picture" early on. Some departments adopt this pattern, too, because it communicates the seriousness of the major and screens out students who are not very motivated or intelligent.[24]

Other departments begin with skills courses and move to theory courses later in the curriculum.[25] Here the belief

[22] See, for example, Joseph W. MacDoniels, "Theory and Research Oriented Communication Major: Use of Colloquia," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Chicago, November, 1991.

[23] Craig R. Streff, "Teaching Communication Theory at Wauwatosa East," Teacher Talk 1 (1982): 1-3; Craig R. Streff, "Teaching Communication Theory at Wauwatosa East High School," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, November, 1980.

[24] See, for example, Charles J. Stewart, "Theory and Research Oriented Communication Major: Pre-Communication Requirements," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association convention, Atlanta, November, 1991.

[25] See, for example, Alan Lerstrom, "Pulling It Together: The Importance of Synthesizing and Summarizing in a Theory Based Capstone Course," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, San Francisco, 1989; Cindy Buell and Delmas S. Crisp, "The Evolution of an Interdiscipinary Major: A Case Study," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association meeting, November, 1990; and Cindy Buell, "An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Communication Major," paper presented at the Speech Communication Association meeting, Atlanta, November, 1991.

is that competence consists largely of behavioral performance, that inexperienced students do not have a sufficient behavioral repertoire, and that practical experience may be necessary as background for more advanced study of theory.[26] Skills courses are believed to provide a practical background and introduction to the field, which in turn prepare students for the theory courses offered in the junior or senior years.

One advantage to offering rhetorical and communication theory in the senior year is that they provide an excellent summary of the discipline for students planning to attend graduate school. Often students develop an interest in graduate school in these courses late in their major. Had such courses occurred earlier, these students might not have been well enough prepared for and thus not sufficiently excited by the material to use it as a springboard to an advanced degree.

Another curricular tension concerns the proportion of theory and application that appears in these courses. Some instructors believe in a strong separation of theory from practice: in theory courses, students should seek to grasp the theoretical constructs of the field, with little regard

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[26] Rebecca B. Rubin and Elizabeth E. Graham, "Communication Correlates of College Success: An Exploratory Investigation," Communication Education 37 (1988): 14-28; Joan E. Aitken and Michael Neer, "A Faculty Program of Assessment for a College Level Competency-Based Communication Core Curriculum," Communication Education 41 (1992): 270-86.

for actual performance.[27] Others believe that theory without practice is meaningless; that unless students have the opportunity to apply the theories under discussion, they do not grasp their usefulness and value.[28] In rhetoric, this issue often revolves around the relationship between rhetorical theory and rhetorical criticism, or more broadly, between an understanding of rhetorical processes and ideas and their application.[29]

The issue of theory versus practice is part of a larger debate on the nature of communication competence. There is a large literature on this subject, which is well beyond the scope of this paper.[30] Most teachers of communication and

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[27] See, for example, Michael Burgoon, "Instruction About Communication: On Divorcing Dame Speech," Communication Education 38 (1989): 303-08.

[28] See, for example, Robert T. Craig, "Communication as a Practical Discipline," Rethinking Communication: Volume I--Paradigm Issues, eds. Brenda Dervin, Lawrence Grossberg, Barbara J. O'Keefe, and Ellen Wartella (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989) 97-124; Lee Thayer, "What Would A Theory of Communication Be For?" Journal of Applied Communication Research 10 (1982): 21-28; Kenneth K. Sereno, "Making Theory Relevant," paper presented at the Western States Communication Association convention, Boise, February, 1992; and MacDoniels.

[29] See, for example, Jeffrey L. Bineham, "Pedagogical Justification for a Theory-Method Distinction in Rhetorical Criticism," Communication Education 39 (1990): 30-45; and Frederick J. Antczak, "Teaching Rhetoric and Teaching Morality: Some Problems and Possibilities of Ethical Criticism," Rhetoric Society Quarterly 19 (1989): 15-22.

[30] See, for example, Rebecca B. Rubin, "Communication Competence," Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversay of the Speech Communication Association, eds. Gerald M. Phillips and Julia T. Wood (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990) 94-129.

rhetorical theory probably believe that competence is developed by studying a combination of theory and practice.[31]

There are also tensions of a content sort that arise when the teaching of communication and rhetorical theory are discussed. An ongoing issue is the separation of rhetoric and communication into distinct areas, each with allegedly different concerns and methods.[32] The perpetuation of this split continues to be reflected by distinct rhetoric and communication tracks in majors, separate courses in theory for each of these areas, different methods requirements for each, and even department names that include both of these concepts. While there are certainly many instructors whose backgrounds and approaches make them reluctant to continue to make these distinctions so strongly, the tradition of the field, specialized graduate education, different aptitudes and interests on the part of faculty, and the lack of integrative textbooks makes teaching a course in theory that includes both the rhetorical and communication traditions difficult. Consequently, programs continue to maintain the split, even though it may not always be particularly useful, especially for undergraduates.

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[31] This hypothesis is explored by Stephen W. Littlejohn and David M. Jabusch, "Communication Competence: Model and Application," Journal of Applied Communication Research 10 (1982): 29-37.

[32] Pearce, "Scientific Research Methods."

Another ongoing tension in the teaching of rhetorical and communication theory is disciplinary borrowing.[33] Until relatively recently, there were few theories developed within the discipline per se. Instead, communication theory borrowed heavily from psychology and sociology, while the disciplines of English and philosophy were the principal sources for understanding rhetorical theory. Borrowing per se is not a bad thing because it instills a sense of multi-disciplinary knowledge in students and is a liberalizing influence in education. At the same time, many of the theories used in these courses did not deal directly with communication.

The communication field now has produced many fine theories, both humanistic and scientific, to include in communication courses. This tension should diminish as more and more scholars, raised in the communication discipline per se, explore the distinctive contributions we can make to an understanding of human social life and discourse when communication is taken as the organizing principle and starting point for inquiry.[34]

A final tension involved in the teaching of communication and rhetorical theory is the Western male bias of most

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[33] Herman Cohen, "The Development of Research in Speech Communication," Speech Communication in the 20th Century 292; and Bochner and Eisenberg.

[34] Stephen W. Littlejohn, Theories of Human Communication, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989) 288.

contemporary theories in communication.[35] While some instructors insist that there is an established canon which students must learn in order to be proficient in the discipline, others are questioning how appropriate the traditional canon is for understanding contemporary communication situations.[36] Researchers in rhetorical theory, for instance, are beginning to challenge the Western male bias of rhetoric inherited from Aristotle but assumed to be comprehensive when dealing with non-Western cultures and women.[37] Is "eloquence" for women, for instance, the same as "eloquence" for men? Do women create and attribute ethos differently than men? What logics have governed the efforts of non-Western cultures to use communication strategically?

Proposed Research Agenda

A number of issues lie in wait of investigation. Chief among these are the following:

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[35] D. Lawrence Kincaid, Communication Theory: Eastern and Western Perspectives (San Diego: Academic Press, 1987); and Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 273-314.

[36] Kincaid; Elizabeth J. Natalle, "Gender and Communication Theory," Communication Education 40 (1991): 94-98; and Foss. Foss, and Trapp.

[37] Foss, Foss, and Trapp 273-314; Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss, Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1991); and James S. Baumlin and Tita French Baumlin, "Psyche/Logos: Mapping the Terrains of Mind and Rhetoric," College English 51 (1989): 245-59.

The Multicultural Agenda

Without question, the majority of rhetorical and communication theory courses deal almost exclusively with Western, Eurocentric thought. To what extent and in what ways does this material meet the needs of the entire student body? To what extent and in what ways should these courses be expanded to include multicultural insights on communication?

Student Readiness

At what point and in what ways should theory be introduced into the curriculum? Research should be done on the question of cognitive readiness and ability. Studies focusing on the relationship of theory to skill are especially important in our field.

Methods of Teaching Abstract Concepts

Especially important for the teaching of theory is the effectiveness of various methods for helping students learn abstract concepts. Since our field is both theoretical and applied, research should center in part on the degree to which abstract concepts can be learned through application to more concrete events.

Teaching and Learning in Different Campus Environments

Of particular concern in the CSU are the different educational demands of our various campus. CSU-sponsored research could fruitfully investigate the ways in which these

courses may have to be taught differently in urban and rural schools, commuter and residential campuses, campuses with large ethnic minority populations and those with fewer minorities, and different types of curricular structures.

Integrating Rhetorical and Communication Theory

Some attention should be given also to the separation of rhetorical and communication theory. What is the rationale for this separation in the 1990s? Are curricula and student needs best met by fusing the two or by keeping them separate?